

making love with his ego

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making love with his ego

by [Lise](#)

Summary

Loki dies on the Statesman.

He wakes up on Sakaar.

Notes

There was a point at which I saw a lot of things along the lines of "what if the Grandmaster stepped in and swept Loki away to safety?" and my brain being what it is went "YEAH WHAT IF" and...this was what happened. I'm writing a lot of *actual* fix-its (they're in progress! just taking a while) including one that is kind of an inverse companion to this one, but this one is full...me taking a concept and writing it through to what I felt was the natural endpoint.

But hey! Loki's alive, so there's that.

Anyway, that's enough out of me - thanks to my tireless [beta](#) and with this fic especially to [led-lite](#) who has been cheering me on for this thing for months in my Tumblr DMs. Enjoy.

The first thing Loki thought when he surfaced from oblivion was *really? Again?*

His second thought was *how in all the Nine am I still alive?*

He opened his eyes slowly, half expecting to see the interior of Thanos's ship, to find that he had not been killed but instead held back for further tortures, to suffer without the release of death, to watch as Thanos burned the universe down - but unless Thanos had indulged in a spacious bedroom, brightly colored, with a large, four-poster bed, Loki did not think that was the case.

No, this was something else.

Sensation bled back in slowly, and he regretted it immediately. His entire body felt like one great wound. His head felt like his brain had been crushed and then reconstructed. His neck--

He swallowed hard. The whole column of his throat ached like someone (*someone, ha*) was still squeezing it.

But who - *how*--

With uncanny timing, the door opened, and an altogether too familiar figure swept in bearing a tray. "He awakes!" said the Grandmaster, beaming at him. "Good, good - I imagine you're feeling just *awfully*, though, you were - hoo boy, not in good shape when I found you. But that's all right, all better now - drink some juice, it'll help."

Loki blinked at him, dazed. "I don't..."

"Shhh," the Grandmaster said, holding out a cup with a straw in it. "Juice."

Loki took it, because his mouth did feel dry as bone, and sipped. It was cool and sweet and quite possibly the best thing he'd ever tasted. He started to give up on the straw and swallow the whole thing, but the Grandmaster stopped him.

"Hey, hon," he said. "Take it slow. No need to rush. I'm not kidding about that *not in good shape*, I really had to, uh, work hard to patch you up. But that's why - breakfast in bed!" He set the tray, with its load of food, down on Loki's legs. Loki stared at it, stomach twisting uneasily.

"I don't understand," he said blankly.

"You got yourself killed," the Grandmaster said. "You *reckless* boy. But I saved you! Snatched you from the very jaws of death, put you back together, and now you're here!" He beamed, the *aren't I marvelous* expression that made Loki want to grind his molars.

"But...how," Loki said. The Grandmaster raised his eyebrows.

"I'm just that good, sweetheart," he said. Now, come on. Eat something! You need to get your strength back."

Loki's head swam. "Thor," he croaked. "Thor, and...Thanos--"

"Shh," the Grandmaster said. "Shh, darling, honey bunch, you're only going to *upset* yourself thinking about those things. Don't *worry*. Everything's fine!"

Loki tried to push himself up, heart starting to pound. "Tell me - tell me what happened--"

"Hey, hey, hey," the Grandmaster said, pushing him back down - but *gently*. "Don't get worked up, now. I honestly - have no idea. I don't really pay attention to stuff like that."

“You don’t-” Loki made a strangled noise, and the Grandmaster frowned at him.

“Now, Lo,” he said. “I really have to insist that you try to stay calm. You’re still quite delicate.”

“*Delicate?*” Loki surged against the Grandmaster’s hand on his chest, trying to push him away. “I am not - I need to know what happened, what’s happening, Thor is-”

Thor could be dead. He probably *was* dead. All the air went out of Loki’s lungs and he collapsed, staring blankly at the ceiling.

He’d tried. He’d *tried* and it had been utterly *pointless*. Thanos had - at least - two of the Infinity Stones. Asgard’s people had been slaughtered. Thor was, most likely, dead. And here Loki was.

“Oh, no,” the Grandmaster said. “Don’t *cry*, sweetheart. No, really, please don’t, it’s just so - *upsetting*.” He patted Loki’s chest gently. “I’m serious about the juice. It’s really good stuff.”

Loki swallowed hard and painfully. “I don’t want *juice*,” he said, and hated how pathetic he sounded.

“You still *need* it,” the Grandmaster said. “You’re really being - very *ungrateful*.”

Loki wanted to scream. He stared at the tray still resting on his legs and felt the urge to knock it away. “Why,” he croaked. “Why did you bring me back?”

“What do you mean, *why?*” The Grandmaster said, his eyes widening. “Lose a treasure like you? I *couldn’t*. Now, I understand you’re upset, but I really must insist.” He picked up the glass of juice with its accompanying straw and guided it to Loki’s mouth again, his expression one of patient condescension. “If you want to get better, you need to let me take care of you!”

Get better. Hysteria clawed at Loki’s chest, but he shoved it down, trying to force himself to think clearly. The fact was - the fact was that he was alive. And he didn’t know that Thor *wasn’t*, and even if...even if the worst had happened...

All that meant was that Thanos owed him a blood-debt.

He opened his mouth for the straw and took another sip. The juice really *was* good. The Grandmaster beamed at him.

“There he is,” he said fondly. “And don’t worry. Those unsightly bruises will fade in no time at all. You can always wear a scarf until then.”

Loki’s head spun and he nearly fainted. The straw slipped out of his mouth. “Oh,” he said, voice wavering. The Grandmaster smiled sympathetically.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “You’re still *very* pretty.” Loki stared at him woozily.

“Thanos is out there,” he tried again. “If he gets all the Infinity Stones-”

“There you go again,” the Grandmaster said. “Getting yourself all worked up. Everything’s fine, sweetheart. You’re perfectly safe.”

“No one’s safe!” Loki said wildly. “Even you-”

“Hush now,” the Grandmaster said, putting a finger to his lips. “And drink your juice. Or - would you like a scone? They’re very good.”

Loki stared at him, torn between tears and hysterical laughter. He ended up settling on something in between.

“There, there,” the Grandmaster said, stroking his hair. “All right, all right - I can see you’re still feeling, um, fragile. Maybe it’s better if you just...take a little nap, now? I’m sure you’ll feel better when you wake up.”

Whatever the Grandmaster did, it was effective. He went out like a light.

It was actually mostly a relief.

When he woke again, Loki felt a bit more like himself, though still weak and foggy-headed. Of course, with the Grandmaster, that might not be an effect of his...

Kicking wildly at the air, clawing at an immovable arm, spots exploding behind his eyes, the crack of something in his neck fracturing--

Loki rolled to his side and retched over the side of the bed. It occurred to him that the Grandmaster wasn’t going to like that. In the next breath, he thought, *to hell with what he wants. I don’t care.*

When he finished gagging on nothing, Loki’s eyes caught on a glass sitting on the table by the bed: tall, full of a sort of pink-orange liquid, garnished with an umbrella. He stared at it for several moments, the hysterical urge to laugh bubbling up again.

Get up, he thought harshly. *On your feet, Odinson. You’re not dead, which means there’s still work to do.* He rolled to the edge of the bed and pushed himself to sitting, and then to his feet. His knees felt wobbly as a colt’s, and without the cover of blankets he was painfully aware of the fact that he was completely naked. He tried to summon his clothing with no result; his magic sparked and fizzled. Loki shoved down the twist of fear and forced himself to take a deep breath. It was no surprise that he would be drained.

Glancing about the room, Loki found a dresser and stumbled over to it, relieved he didn’t fall flat on his face just getting there.

Oh, yes. You’re going to be so useful in the fight against Thanos like this.

One step at a time, he told himself, and opened one of the drawers to find something to wear, frowning at the silky, flimsy garments he found there. Still, at least it was *something* to cover himself with until he could get out of here and--

“Lo-lo! What *are* you doing out of bed?”

Loki almost crumpled. He did squeeze his eyes closed. “I was going to,” he started to say, but the Grandmaster was already taking him by the shoulders and turning Loki towards him.

“Shhh,” he said. “Don’t answer. Doesn’t matter, you - you *silly* boy. Look at you! Still shaking, and you haven’t *touched* your smoothie, and - oh no, did you sick up on the floor?” He clicked his tongue, guiding Loki slowly but inexorably back toward the bed. “Ugh, *disgusting*. Not you, sweetheart,” he added, with what was probably meant to be a reassuring smile. Loki resisted being pushed, trying to dig in his heels.

“You’re powerful,” Loki said, hoping to appeal to the Grandmaster’s vanity. “You have to know that if he succeeds Thanos won’t leave you alone--”

The Grandmaster frowned at him. “Thanos, Thanos - is that all you can talk about?” He clicked his tongue. “Lo-lo. *Trust* me. Sakaar is *safe*. *You’re* safe. All that - that nasty stuff, out there - you don’t need to *worry* about that anymore.” He squeezed Loki’s shoulders lightly. “Got it?”

There was no warning in his voice, but Loki still knew it was present. He worked moisture into his mouth and made himself nod. “Of course,” he said numbly, even though he knew it wasn’t true. Or, even if it was, it didn’t *matter*.

But the Grandmaster wasn’t listening. Loki was just going to have to find a way out on his own. As soon as he could stand for longer than five minutes without feeling like he was going to fold.

“Good,” the Grandmaster said with a smile. “I’m so glad we understand each other. You and me just - you broke my heart, Lo, vanishing like you did. Really just - *hurt* me. But I’m willing to forgive and forget, here.” He gave Loki a little push back again, and this time he went, sinking down to sit on the side of the bed. “I’m nice like that.”

“Indeed,” Loki said faintly.

“That’s why I brought you back!” The Grandmaster said brightly. “Because I really - *really* think we can make this work.”

Loki had to try. One last time. “I’m sure we could, but if I might-”

“Hush,” the Grandmaster said, putting a finger on Loki’s lips. “Now. Why don’t you drink that smoothie of yours, and I’ll run you a nice bath. You’re a little - don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re a bit *ripe*. Not - really, not *so* bad, all things considered, but...I think you’ll feel better after a wash, hmm?”

Loki did not think he would feel better after a wash. He did not think he would feel better so long as he was *here*. Trapped, while who-knew-what happened elsewhere, while Thor was - Thor *was* alive, he had to be, but doubtless he was getting himself into trouble and Loki needed to be *there*.

And instead he was...being pampered and nursemaided by an immortal madman.

He wanted to scream. Instead he made himself pick up the smoothie and sip at it. The Grandmaster smiled indulgently at him and patted his leg. The touch of his palm on bare skin made Loki tense, but the gesture seemed to be, for once, entirely chaste. “There you go,” he said, and swept off to the bathroom. A moment later, Loki heard the water start running.

He eyed the door again, wondering if he could reach it, but he was still naked. Conspicuous. And weak.

His hand drifted up to his neck. He hissed at the sensitivity of the skin, stirring up a pulse of pain, the ache of a deep bruise. When he pulled his hand away, it faded, and he wondered if it was some kind of magic at work.

Some kind of magic at work. Obviously. You were dead, and now you’re alive. If that isn’t magic-

You were dead. Not nearly dead, not should have died, but truly - he remembered. Altogether too vividly, those last scraps of consciousness. He squeezed his eyes closed and tried to focus on breathing deeply.

“All righty,” he heard, and jerked his head up too sharply. The Grandmaster walked back over to him. “Up you get, let’s - bathtime. Don’t worry, I’ll help, you’re looking a little woozy there again - let’s bring the smoothie, shall we?” He was drawing Loki to his feet before he could resist,

steering him over to the bathroom, and Loki told himself he wasn't fighting because it wasn't worth it, because he wanted to conserve his energy.

Not because some part of him, sick at heart and aching, was horribly grateful for someone taking care of him.

"That's it," the Grandmaster was saying, pattering on. "Now, check the temperature - should be just right, I know you-

Loki was only half listening, because his eyes had caught on the mirror.

His throat was ringed with a massive, purple-blue bruise. He could make out the darker imprints of large fingers. His hair hung lank and oily around his face, too pale. He looked like he'd crawled out of Hel. Or been dragged out.

His heart hammered against his ribcage and he heard himself make a small, pathetic, whimpering sound. The Grandmaster seemed to notice belatedly, following Loki's gaze, and clicked his tongue. *He* looked just the same as ever. Of course.

"Oh, sweetheart," he said. "Really, don't look so upset. It's *temporary*. You'll be back to your usual gorgeous self soon enough. Promise."

Loki opened his mouth and closed it. He couldn't look away.

"We'll get rid of that, shall we?" The Grandmaster said, pulling Loki away, over toward the filling bathtub. "No mirrors, hm? Go on, climb in, let's take your mind off these nasty little, little details. You're *fine*. In, ah, more than one sense, right? Well, maybe a bit off right now, but you'll polish right up, we both know that."

Loki stayed quiet, sinking into the water filling the enormous tub sunken in the floor. He drew his knees up to his chest, staring ahead. His inhaled hitched a little, and the Grandmaster sighed heavily.

"*Lo-ki*," he said reproachfully. "I understand you're a little - disoriented, but really, isn't this a little much?"

"I was *dead*," Loki said. "I *died*."

"You're so *fixated* on that." The Grandmaster waved a hand. "Only *sort* of. You're here now. Safe. With me." His smile was dazzling. Loki just looked at him, and the Grandmaster shook his head. "Really now. Let me...I'm going to go get your smoothie, sweetheart, and let's see if we can't turn that frown upside down, shall we?"

Loki let his head fall back, eyes closed, into the water. It was the perfect temperature. Of course.

The Grandmaster returned, presenting Loki with the glass, and he didn't argue. He was dimly aware something might have been added, but at the moment he couldn't quite muster the ability to care. Later. He'd care *later*.

He realized belatedly that the Grandmaster was shedding his clothes, and stared up at him, eyes widening. "Ah," he started to say.

"What's that?" The Grandmaster said, and then laughed, probably at the look on Loki's face. "Oh! Oh, *sweetheart*. It's not like *that*, don't be - goodness, what a dirty mind you have. I'm just *helping*."

Loki felt that hysterical itch in his throat again, and tried to force it down. “Oh,” he said breathlessly. “Of course.”

“So scootch,” the Grandmaster said with a little wave of his hand. “This is - you know, I wouldn’t normally give just anyone this much *personal* attention, but that’s just how special you are.”

“I’m flattered,” Loki said. The Grandmaster smiled at him.

“Of course you are,” he said, and climbed in behind Loki, stretching his legs out on either side of him, close enough that Loki could feel his breath tickle the base of his neck. His fingers tickled up Loki’s sides and even with the warmth of the water seeping up over his hips he still shivered.

“That’s it,” the Grandmaster murmured. “Lean back, now, let’s get comfortable...”

Loki leaned back, giving up (momentarily, *momentarily*) on resistance. He was still altogether too aware of the Grandmaster’s body against his, of how many times a scene like this had preceded - well, something other than just a bath.

“So *tense*,” the Grandmaster said. “Seriously, honey. Don’t you ever...? No, who am I kidding, I know you. We were working on that, weren’t we? Before you so *rudely* took off.” He shifted Loki, tucking a strand of hair back behind his ear. “That’s okay. We’ll pick up where we left off, make sure you learn how to *relax*.”

Loki closed his eyes, his stomach sinking. But he didn’t argue. The warm water felt miserably good, and the Grandmaster’s hands miserably better. *I hate you*, he thought. *I hate you*, but he didn’t try to pull away.

“We’ll have you right as rain in no time,” the Grandmaster said. “Now. Let’s wash that hair of yours.”

Based on his thorough work on Loki’s scalp - and his back, and his shoulders, and the rest of him - the Grandmaster would have made a good masseuse. By the time he was done, Loki felt limp, boneless, and a little dizzy from the steam.

The Grandmaster, on the other hand, seemed to be in a different mood. “Whoops,” he said, an all too familiar feeling prodding at Loki’s back. “Well. Can’t help it. You don’t mind if I just...”

“It’s fine,” Loki said wearily. He was going to have to pick his battles.

At least he seemed content with rubbing himself off on Loki’s back rather than anything more. Small blessings.

He didn’t have a lot of those.

Loki didn’t remember getting back into bed. He supposed he must have been carried. Regardless, when he woke again he felt substantially more like himself: less weak, less achy, less foggy-headed.

If you can stand, he told himself, pushing himself up and putting his bare feet on the floor, *you can walk. If you can walk, you can run. And if you can run, you can get off this planet and find Thor.*

Loki imagined using magic to pull his own clothes to him rather than the flimsy garments that were all he had right now, but he didn’t particularly want to stretch himself right now, when he was already weak and might have greater need later. He walked over to the dresser, pulled on the first clothes he found, and turned toward the door. No, too obvious.

The window, then.

Pressing a hand to the clear pane of the window, Loki looked out and down. It was a long way to fall. And Loki's body was still...not fully intact. What if his magic faltered?

Wait, whispered a voice in the back of his mind. *Bide your time. Regain your strength. Then...*

There might not be a *then*. Thanos was out there, moving, right now--

Loki realized that his lungs were starting to constrict. His hand came fluttering up to his throat (*whole, intact*) and he forced himself to breathe. *You are the master of your fear, not it of you.*

(As though that's ever been true.)

He made himself inhale, hold his breath, and stop delaying.

Loki had no idea what the window was made of, but it shattered like glass on impact, and then he was falling. He twisted, changing into a falcon in midair, and shot out toward the wastelands on swift wings. There were plenty of scavengers with ships, all he had to do was take one and find his way to a portal that would go *somewhere* other than here, and from there--

You always look too far ahead, Frigga had scolded him, more than once. *You trip over the rock in your path for staring too long at the mountain on the horizon.*

He felt something *jerk*, painfully, in his chest. A moment later he was dropping out of the sky, forced back into his usual shape, heaving into piles of trash as his intestines tried to force their way up his throat. His eyes watered and Loki tried to push himself to stand, but the moment he got to his knees he was retching again, vicious cramps folding him in half, shaking as if with a fever.

No, he thought frantically. *No, no, no*. He tried again to get up. Failed again. He tried *crawling*, but even then he could only shuffle a short ways before collapsing, curling up around his entrails that were twisting inside him and breathing raggedly.

There were slavers out here. Scavengers. Any one of them could find him, easy prey like this, and the *lucky* option was that they might take him back to the Grandmaster. Otherwise he could find himself processed into food by the end of the day.

Loki spat out a stream of the most vicious curses he could think of, none of which did anything. He *hurt*, outside again and now inside too, and the nausea wouldn't let him go, and why hadn't he just stayed *dead*.

There was a ship approaching. Loki held still, his only hope that maybe he could play dead well enough to escape notice. When this passed--

(It had to pass.)

The ship was coming to a halt. The engines sounded smooth, well-constructed. Not a junker, then, which meant a slightly better connected scrapper. His chances of surviving went up. His chances of escape dwindled, now down to almost nothing. Loki could have wept out of frustration.

"*There he is!*"

Loki moaned, squeezing his eyes closed. The nausea seemed to be easing, far too late.

"All right, that's it, just - set down here. Goodness, it really is a *mess*, isn't it? Oh no, Lo,

sweetheart, you *really* don't look too good. What were you *thinking*? Tearing off like that."

His hands were on Loki's shoulders and a wave of relief washed through Loki - magic? Probably, and he couldn't even care. Just grateful. The sickness was vanishing as quickly as it had come on, though he still felt shaky, weak.

"What did you do," he asked, voice wobbling.

"*Do*? Me? Come on, up you get, let's...that *smell*, sheesh." Loki let himself be pulled to his feet, the Grandmaster supporting him over to the ship he'd flown over here. Well, *he* hadn't flown. There was a pilot. Loki let himself be sat down and stared at the Grandmaster, curiously numb.

"I need to go," Loki said. "I can-" Loki gulped. "I'll promise to come back, if you need me to, but-"

"Ah," the Grandmaster cut him off. "Here's the - here's the *thing*, Lo-lo. I'm really not...you're just not *safe*, out there. Look what happened last time? You *died*."

Loki's throat started to close. *Kicking at empty air, idiot, couldn't you think of anything better oh Norns Thor I'm sorry-*

"Easy there," the Grandmaster said. "You're fine *now*, obviously. But I just - how can I know you won't go scampering off and do it again?"

Would it matter, when you can just bring me back? Loki shook his head. "I'd be careful," he insisted. "I don't particularly *want* to-"

"The other problem," the Grandmaster said, "is - well. You see, bringing someone back from the dead is...it's a complicated business, and you weren't in great shape, so I sort of had to...well, patch you back together." Loki felt ill and pushed it down, forcing himself to pay attention. "Which means that...hmm. You're sort of, ah...one could say that we're really *connected*."

Loki's stomach plummeted like a rock into a ravine. "Connected," he echoed, weakly.

"Hmm-mm." The Grandmaster smiled at him. "Bit of a side effect, I guess. I mean, it's great! Adds a whole layer of...well. But it *does* mean that if you, um, get too far away from me, your body gets a bit...unhappy. All that magic I stuffed in you acting up. *Not* fun."

No, Loki thought, desperate. *Oh no. Please.*

"But really, isn't it for the best? Now you can let go of all this nonsense about *leaving*, because...I know you feel like you *should* but, see, you can't help it. So you can just stay here! Safe. With me. Isn't that great?"

Loki thought he was going to cry. And, true, he was exhausted and had vomited the little he'd eaten and he'd just come back from the *dead*, but this...this.

"There, there," the Grandmaster said, patting him on the shoulder. "I know this is all a bit overwhelming. But you just need to stop *fussing* so much! Let's go back to your room, get some fluids back in you, maybe a bit of a, hm, something to settle the nerves?"

You're going to drug me, Loki thought wearily, but he just nodded. Wasn't like there was much point in arguing.

The Grandmaster hadn't called it what it was, but he didn't need to. A leash. And Loki suspected

he'd known *exactly* what Loki would try, and let him run *just* far enough before yanking on the chain.

He was glad he apparently hadn't wound up in Valhalla. That would make this so, so much worse.

Loki drank what the Grandmaster gave him without bothering to ask questions, exhausted and miserable enough that he couldn't really care what it would do. As it turned out, it just left him foggy headed and relaxed, unable to focus on anything in particular.

The Grandmaster had him take another bath in perfumed water. "To wash off that nasty smell," he said, though Loki suspected it had more to do with the opportunity to rub his hands all over Loki's body. He was high enough that he didn't even care.

At least, not until the Grandmaster's hands drifted up to Loki's neck. He flinched, a very faint sound escaping him. The Grandmaster pressed down, an ache blooming under his fingers, and Loki tried weakly to twist away. "Oh, dear," the Grandmaster said. "Still a bit...tender, I take it."

"He broke..." Loki's breathing hitched. Panic rose, but the drug pushed it back down, and the Grandmaster was shushing him.

"I know, I know," he said. "Trust me, I...well, I was the one who put you back together, wasn't I? You poor thing. This is why - I don't understand why you're in such a hurry to leave."

A part of Loki wasn't sure, either. "There are things I need to do," he said, but he couldn't remember very well what they were.

"Sounds boring." The Grandmaster rubbed his thumbs into the muscle of Loki's shoulders. "And *dangerous*. You don't want *this* to happen again, do you?" One of his hands moved again, and this time his fingers slid across Loki's throat, slotting into the marks of larger fingers, tightening, squeezing.

He felt himself, as if at a great distance, tip and fall over the edge. The warm water was gone, the soft lights, he was kicking at empty air, forcing out final words (*you will never be a god*)--

Then it was just the Grandmaster again, making comforting noises.

"Don't," Loki said, his voice shaky and hoarse. "Don't...do that. *Please*."

"Do what?" The Grandmaster asked, sounding puzzled. Loki wavered, confused.

"Put your hand around my neck," he managed to say, one hand fluttering defensively up toward his throat only to pull away, not daring to touch. "It's..."

"Put my - Loki, are you feeling quite all right? Well, obviously not. You didn't take anything when I wasn't looking, did you?" He sounded so...concerned. Solicitous. "I didn't do anything of the kind."

Loki shook his head, trying to clear the haze from his thoughts. *He's lying*, he thought, but the uncertainty lingered. Maybe he was finally losing his mind for good.

Maybe that wouldn't be the worst thing that could happen to him. He slumped back against the Grandmaster again. "Better?" He said, and Loki nodded. It was better. If he just relaxed into this, it could be *nice*. If he just stopped trying to fight it.

Why *should* he fight it? He'd *died*. Why shouldn't he be able to rest?

"Thor needs me," Loki said blurrily. The Grandmaster huffed.

"Thor, Thor, Thor," he said. "Is that - you're so *fixated* on him."

"He's my brother," Loki said. "And he's all alone-" He cut off as the Grandmaster's thumb found something that *popped* under his touch, and he felt it all the way up in his skull.

"*There* we go," the Grandmaster said, sounding approving. "Look, sweetheart - just let *go*. Stop *thinking* so much."

"It's what I do best," he said blurrily. "Other than - not die," and he hiccuped a laugh that sounded strange in his own ears. The Grandmaster gathered a hank of hair and gave a light tug.

"Don't be morbid," he chided. "Come on, now. That's it."

The last of his resistance was rapidly slipping away. Everything the Grandmaster was doing with his hands felt good, he felt good, he was warm and comfortable and *safe* and couldn't he just...accept that? Why did he always have to second-guess everything?

No. He'd earned this, this...*vacation*.

"Are you...are you fucking with my head," he asked, the slur in his voice making him laugh.

"Would I do that?" The Grandmaster sounded a little like he wanted to laugh, too.

"Yes," Loki said. "Absolutely."

"Only for your own good, honeybunch," he said, leaning forward and kissing Loki lightly on the temple. "Only *ever* for your own good."

Loki woke up clear-headed and with the Grandmaster's arm draped over his torso. He couldn't remember much of what had happened after they got out of the bath. Could barely remember *getting* out of the bath. He couldn't decide if that was a blessing or a curse.

Disentangling himself slowly from the Grandmaster's arm, he picked up a robe from the back of a chair and started to sneak quietly toward the door. He stretched out a hand to open it and felt nausea crawl up the back of his throat. He took a step forward and sweat broke out.

Loki's breathing quickened. He glanced back at the bed, then at the door. It opened easily enough, and he could step out, but he started to shake, cold seeping into him starting at the tips of his fingers.

No, he thought. *No, unbelievable.*

But he couldn't make himself take another step.

Loki backed into the room again and closed the door, staring at it. He heard the Grandmaster yawn.

"Where're you going?"

"I'd like to leave the room," Loki said, struggling to keep his voice even.

"I don't know why you *would*, but...the door's right there."

For a moment Loki almost believed it. That the Grandmaster didn't know what he was doing, that it was somehow just tied to his whims and not intent. Almost. For a moment. "I can't. The magic. Your...leash."

"My *leash*? Goodness, Loki, that's a...well, a nice image. We never did that, did we?"

He was going to scream. He wanted to scream. "You *know* what I'm talking about," Loki said, his voice pitching higher outside of his bidding. "You're doing this, you're keeping me here, chained to you-"

"All this talk of leashes and chains is just giving me ideas," the Grandmaster said airily. Loki stared at him, panting.

He had no power. No leverage. *Nothing*.

Loki wanted to fight it. He *should* fight it, should throw himself (uselessly, pointlessly) against the Grandmaster's magical tether, because even if he could not break it he should at least demonstrate that he *wanted* to.

"Come back to bed, sugarplum," the Grandmaster said. He patted the mattress next to him. "Let's cuddle."

Loki closed his eyes and shuddered. He'd tried the direct approach. If he played along - maybe he would think of something else. Some other way out. Just because he couldn't see one now...

By the time he found one, it might be too late. It might *already* be too late.

The Grandmaster frowned faintly. "What's going on in that pretty head of yours? You're not worried I'll *bite*, are you?" He chuckled. "Oh, no. You *like* it when I bite."

Loki twitched. "No," he said. "I am...not worried."

"Good," he said. "Good - so?" He patted the bed again. Loki gave up and turned back, letting himself be pulled down and folded against the Grandmaster's side. He pressed a kiss to Loki's neck, just below his ear. "Oh, sweetheart," he murmured. "I know this isn't *easy*. But I'm here for you." Another kiss, and Loki shivered a little.

I hate you, Loki thought, and leaned into the Grandmaster's warmth. "Have you...brought a lot of people back, as you did me?" He asked.

"Not many," the Grandmaster said, his arm draped over Loki's stomach, fingers trailing over his ribs. "Just a few very *special* individuals. You should really - you should be flattered, Lo."

"Flattered," Loki echoed. "Of course."

"Obviously!" The Grandmaster said. "I mean - look where you are. People would *kill* to be here. I mean - I mean *literally* kill. Just last week - oh, never mind, I don't want to, uh, upset you. You'll be perfectly safe as long as you're close to me. And I plan to - hm, keep you *very* close." He winked, and Loki swallowed hard.

"I'm honored," he managed to say. "Truly. You favor me too much, Grandmaster."

"Oh, probably," he said breezily. "But what can I say? You're pretty, funny, smart - maybe a little

too smart but that's part of what makes you so fun to have around..." His fingers drifted down, sliding across Loki's hipbone. "Really, I'm lucky to have, ah, snapped you up."

Loki twitched as the Grandmaster's hand moved close to his groin, hips twisting away from his touch. "Ah," he said. "I don't think--"

"Hush," the Grandmaster said, pushing him back into place. "I'm not...we're not going to get into anything *aerobic*. But you...hmm, you fell asleep so fast last night that I didn't get a chance to...give you a test drive."

Loki summoned a strained smile. "If I recall, you had a bit more than a test drive the last time I was here," he said, and was a little proud of how smoothly it came out. The Grandmaster smiled at him.

"Oh, for sure," he said. "But then you went and died, and I had to bring you back, and...well, I just want to make sure everything's *working* all right."

Loki tried again. "I'm still fairly tired--"

The Grandmaster laid a finger on his lips. "You don't have to do *anything*, sweetpea. Just lie back and...and let me steer."

Some part of Loki relaxed even as the rest of him tensed, and he froze caught between the two for too long to say anything - if there was anything he could even say. He could almost feel the tug of the leash on him. Maybe he *could* feel it: the Grandmaster reeling him in like a fish. Loki was already naked, exposed to the Grandmaster's fondling.

His body, however, seemed disinclined to respond.

"Oh," the Grandmaster said, frowning slightly. "Oh, dear."

"I'm sorry," Loki said, largely insincere. Relieved that for once he and his body were in agreement about what they wanted.

"That's - *that's* disappointing. Lo, are you - what's the matter?" He was still *trying*, and Loki had to focus on not swatting his hand away.

"I suppose I am just not...fully myself still," he said. The Grandmaster's frown deepened.

"That's just - that's *awful*, I've never had this problem before. You're not holding *out* on me, are you?" His hand slid between Loki's legs and squeezed his balls, and Loki twisted, jerking away with a hiss.

"Ah - Grandmaster," he said, trying to pull back only to feel his throat starting to tighten. "That doesn't feel - I don't think I can. Just now." He summoned a smile, the relief vanishing quickly in the face of anxiety that the Grandmaster might decide that wasn't an acceptable answer. "You did *just*...put me back together."

The Grandmaster was still frowning. "I *suppose*," he said, sounding sulky. "But that's really - this is *very* inconvenient. I was looking forward to...you know, a nice morning in bed." He paused. "I suppose there are some, ah...*options* that might fix that."

No, was Loki's first thought. He swallowed hard. "Don't you think it might be better to...wait? Until I can...can fully *enjoy* what you're offering." He tried to smile. Hoping it looked convincing.

The Grandmaster's fingers tapped against his inner thigh, one after the other. "Oh, I suppose," he

said. "I don't want to, ah...push you too hard. You're recovering from a very traumatic experience, after all."

Loki exhaled. "Yes," he said, and added, "thanks to you."

The Grandmaster waved a hand, but he was obviously pleased. "Yes, well. I want to treat with the care you deserve, sweet thing, and if that means I have to be a little patient...well, I'll manage."

It was embarrassing, how much of a relief that was. That he might be lying naked in bed with a man who'd brought him back from death and held a leash that Loki couldn't break (yet, *yet*) but at least he wasn't going to be fucked for a little longer. How fortunate he was.

"You're most gracious," Loki said. The Grandmaster beamed at him.

"I am, aren't I?" He said. His hand moved back to draping across Loki's torso. "Well, you know. I don't find a treasure like you every day. So: small change of plans: I think we'll still stay in, but we'll take it easy - order food, maybe some dancers, take some measurements for your new wardrobe...you'll feel better when you're all prettied up, I know you will. And maybe, ah...we'll take some measurements for that collar idea too, hmm?"

No, Loki thought. *Absolutely not*. He closed his eyes. *Patience. While you find a way out - there's a way out. There has to be*. "Whatever you wish, Grandmaster," he murmured.

"Well, obviously," the Grandmaster said. "It's my planet. And you're my - ah - *mine*. Marvelous, isn't it?"

"Yes," Loki said miserably. "Absolutely marvelous."

If it weren't for the company, it might have been a pleasant day.

If it weren't for the company, and the situation, and the fact that the universe could be imploding and Thor might be dead.

"Try one of these," the Grandmaster said, putting an oddly shaped sort of berry to Loki's lips. He parted them after a hitch of just a moment and let the Grandmaster slide his fingers into Loki's mouth to deposit the berry directly on his tongue. He didn't leave them there, at least. The berry itself was a pleasing mixture of tart and sweet that caught him by surprise. He made a pleased noise before catching himself, and the Grandmaster grinned.

"He likes that," he said, as though to an audience. "That sounds more like the Loki I remember."

Loki bit his tongue hard. The Grandmaster ran his fingers through Loki's hair, looking back at the performer contorting himself into interesting shapes to a pulsing, irregular, beat.

I can manage this, Loki thought. *Keep my wits about me, hold it together, find a way out of here, find Thor*.

"What are you thinking about, sweet thing?" The Grandmaster asked, tapping his fingers on Loki's shoulder. Loki dragged up a smile from somewhere.

"Nothing, Grandmaster."

It isn't that complicated.

He thought he had an opportunity when the Grandmaster patted his face and kissed him on the

forehead and said he was sorry but he had to be going out, couldn't spend *all* his time with Loki, there were other people who, ha, *demand*ed his attention, it couldn't be helped.

He made all the appropriate noises, held his breath as the Grandmaster left, and waited for the backlash to start. But his breathing stayed clear, his stomach calm.

Loki didn't immediately try to leave. That had been his previous error: moving too quickly, impulsively, without thinking ahead. He needed to think things through.

The first problem, and the most obvious, was that of whatever binding it was that the Grandmaster had placed on him - the tether that was keeping him close. There was a possibility that there was some truth to what the Grandmaster had said - that it was simply a side-effect of resurrecting him - but Loki doubted that. Or at least doubted it was an inevitable one. Which meant he needed to find a way of slipping a binding he couldn't sense, cast by a being much more powerful than he was, and able to be modified according to his whims.

He set that issue aside. For later.

The next problem: Sakaar. Namely, how he was going to get off it. There were ships, obviously, though finding one solid enough to pilot through a wormhole...was more challenging. Still, the Grandmaster's hangar would be a good place to look, and provided he hadn't changed the codes - provided Loki could get close, that the Grandmaster's leash would extend that far - he could steal one easily enough. Steal a ship, sever the binding, and be gone before the Grandmaster noticed he was missing.

Then he would find the nearest planet and seek out news of what was happening, what Thanos was doing--

(The Tesseract, or your brother's life. I assume you have a preference?)

Loki's breathing quickened and he fought the flutters of panic back. He would learn what Thanos had done since he'd--

(You should have chosen your words more carefully.)

He took several deep breaths, closing his eyes for a moment but then he was seeing Thor, on his knees and screaming as Thanos squeezed his head in his fist. He opened them again quickly and tried to focus on his immediate surroundings, but it was like scrabbling for purchase on a crumbling cliffside.

(Not like this, please, not like this, make it fast and clean and Thor close your eyes close your-)

Loki ended up with his back against a wall, his forehead pressed to his knees, counting seconds as he fought to breathe, the fact that it was *hard* pushing him back into the memory like a waterfall pounding on his shoulders as he fought to surface.

He did manage to fight his way out of it to a point where he was no longer convinced that he was dying again, but it took a long time (or felt like it must have - he wasn't entirely certain how long it had *actually* been) and he was exhausted by the end. Exhausted, and humiliated, and unable to keep from thinking *if you are undone so easily - what good are you? You'll drop dead of your own fear before raising a hand to fight.*

Loki dug his nails into the skin of his wrist and forced himself to stand up. At least he'd be one more body Thanos would have to step over.

(If he hadn't already won. Loki's mind obligingly conjured the image of Thor lying sprawled limp and boneless in death and his vision went grey; he just barely kept his footing, forcing the visual out of his mind.)

If nothing else...if nothing else, Loki reminded himself, there was always vengeance.

(If you can manage it. You're held together with spit and twine.)

Loki shoved that thought out of his mind, too. First things first: he needed to learn more about the binding itself. How it worked, its limits, anything that might help him understand how he could be rid of it. Because he *would* be rid of it. Somehow.

Norns help him, *somehow*.

Naturally, barely an hour later, his reprieve ended.

He'd left his room to do some slight exploration - to at least see where he was being kept, and map some of the surrounding area. There was little of interest, save an extravagant baths that Loki noted for later even as he chided himself for paying mind to such trivialities. He reached the elevator and found that it responded to his thumbprint, but only seemed willing to go to certain levels.

In the end, he retreated back to the room he'd started the day in, not knowing what else to do. Only a few minutes after he received a note borne by a courier, accompanied by a bottle of something pale pink.

Dearest, it said in the Grandmaster's nearly indecipherable scrawl. *I hope you're well rested! I would so love it if you'd join me at tonight's party. It's sure to be a blast!*

'Blast' was underlined enthusiastically twice.

Oh, and: drink up! I had R&D mix this for you special to help perk you up. Don't worry - no funny business! ;) Love, the Grandmaster.

Loki picked up the bottle and examined it like he might be able to tell what was in it. He tried to call on his magic for the same reason, but it still sputtered uselessly, barely functional enough to light a candle. His death, or the Grandmaster's interference? Or maybe the combination of both. Loki set the bottle down and read the note again.

He didn't mistake the invitation for anything but a command. As for the tonic - it could be for anything. Could *do* anything.

Loki felt a wave of hopelessness roll over his head. Whatever it did, one way or another, he was going to end up drinking it. He uncorked the top and took a cautious sip. At least it tasted good.

Halfway through the bottle Loki started to feel the persistent exhaustion ebbing away, the dull lingering ache in his body fading. He hadn't realized how much he was dragging until some of it was eased. He doubted it was just thoughtfulness, but it was still a pleasant surprise - he felt closer to *whole* than he had since...coming back.

So he could almost hold the anxiety at bay when the servant - slave - came to fetch him and guide him to the Grandmaster's party. Almost, though not entirely.

The scene he was ushered into was familiar - too much so. Loud music, bright colors, the babble of a variety of voices in myriad languages. Loki jerked back, almost physically repulsed, suddenly full

of the urge to bolt. The sounds blended together into a chaotic and meaningless cacophony, his head spinning, his chest tightening--

“Oh, Lo-lo! There you are!”

The Grandmaster appeared seemingly out of nowhere, a glass in one hand and smiling. He grasped Loki's arm and tugged him forward to plant a kiss on his cheek.

“Grandmaster,” Loki said faintly. “I don't--”

“Let me stop you there,” the Grandmaster said. “How was the drink? Good, right? You're feeling better?”

What he was feeling was short of breath and overwhelmed. He wanted to run. He wanted to put his hands over his ears and jam himself into a corner with his eyes closed. “Yes,” he heard himself say as though from a great distance. “Much better. Thank you.”

“That's the spirit,” the Grandmaster said warmly. “Though you are looking a bit, hm, dazed. Forgotten what a good Sakaar party is like, have you?”

“Aren't they all good?” Remarkable, Loki thought distantly. That he could still speak when he was somewhere else, clinging to calm by the skin of his teeth.

“Ha! True, true.” The Grandmaster put an arm around Loki's shoulder and pulled him in close, drawing him deeper in. “Smile, hon! This is your coming out party. Making your big debut. Well, second debut, comeback tour, whatever you call it.”

Loki tried to smile, but his heart was racing. “I'm honored,” he said.

“As you should be!” The Grandmaster said, giving him a squeeze. “Seriously, it's really - oh, Pol, did you see who it is? Loki's back!”

Loki didn't recognize the person in front of him, hair a mass of gently waving tendrils, but by the look on her face she recognized him, and wasn't pleased. “Oh,” she said. “What a delightful surprise.”

“Yes,” Loki said. “I'm sure that's the phrase.” He could hear the vibrating edge in his voice like he could feel the vibrating edges inside himself, and took a step back only to bump into the Grandmaster, who seemed distracted.

“Where did you vanish to?” Pol asked. “I heard the most wild rumors about you and that champion, what was he called...”

Loki's stomach clenched and twisted. The room seemed to be growing smaller, the sounds louder. “You shouldn't believe everything you hear,” he said. “Grandmaster--”

“Hmm?” The Grandmaster's hand slid down to the small of Loki's back. “What's - what is it, sweetpea?”

“I...” He lowered his voice, turning his back on Pol and the others with her. “I am not certain I am - entirely ready for this.”

“Nonsense,” the Grandmaster said. “Of course you are! Why wouldn't you be?”

“It's just a bit...” Loki swallowed. “Overwhelming.”

“That’s the *fun* of it,” the Grandmaster said enthusiastically. “You just have to...go with it. Let’s, uh, let’s get you a drink, how about that, hm? Cocktail, something sweet - I know just how you like it, darling.” His salacious wink was almost absurd.

A drink, Loki thought. Maybe that would help. Dull things a little, numb some of the rawness he was feeling. He trailed the Grandmaster to the bar, trying to ignore the way that the noise seemed to have a discordance to it, like this was all hiding something else, an illusion that any moment might crack down the middle to reveal...

“Drink up, Lo-lo,” the Grandmaster said, holding out a glass brimming with pale blue liquid. Loki downed it in one swallow, and the Grandmaster’s eyebrows shot up. “Goodness! Diving right in, hm? I can appreciate that. Now let’s...get this show on the road, shall we? And you just relax, sweet thing. I’m going to take such good care of you.”

His hands wandered down to palm Loki’s ass and pull his body forward, hips grinding forward against him. “Anything?” He asked, eyebrows raised. Loki shook his head, and he sighed, looking briefly sulky. “Oh, well. What’s it they say? *Good things come to those who wait*. We’ll get you there.”

A shudder ran down Loki’s spine that he hoped wasn’t visible. He could feel the drink going to his head, but he didn’t think it was helping. His heart felt like a bird banging against the bars of a cage. “May I have another?” He asked, holding out the glass.

“Sure thing,” the Grandmaster said. “Careful, though, you don’t want to, uh, overdo it, right?”

Loki’s smile felt brittle and painfully false. “Isn’t that part of the fun?”

The Grandmaster laughed, signaling the bartender. “Now *that’s* more like the Lo-lo I know,” he said. “Now come on, sweetheart. Let’s go have some fun.”

Loki let the Grandmaster pull him back into the thick of things, just barely clinging to control, aware that it couldn’t last and just hoping he could hang on long enough to make it through this wretched event. Everything blurred together into a smear of color and noise but somehow he seemed to be remaining coherent enough not to draw notice.

But he was losing ground. Slipping, a little at a time, and finally the Grandmaster paused mid-patter and glanced at him, and frowned. “Lo,” he said. “You’re, uh. You’re shaking.”

“What?” Loki said. He was, though. Little uncontrollable tremors coursing through his body, and he tried to still them and found that he couldn’t. The Grandmaster frowned.

“Are you - are you quite all right, sweet thing?”

“Of course,” Loki said, though his voice wobbled a little. “Never better.”

The Grandmaster’s eyebrows rose slightly. “Let’s...let’s sit you down a minute, hmm?”

Sitting down sounded good. It also sounded dangerous. If he stopped moving, stopped *doing*, he didn’t know that he could keep it together. “I’m fine,” he said, though his voice sounded thin.

The Grandmaster clicked his tongue. “Hon,” he said. “You *know* I don’t like it when you lie to me. Come on.” He took Loki’s arm and pulled him over to a couch, shooing the two occupants away and giving Loki a little push. Loki sat, though the Grandmaster remained standing, looking down at him.

“Now. What’s the matter?”

Loki swallowed convulsively and shook his head, a lump rising in his throat. The Grandmaster pursed his lips and sat down. “Oh, dear,” he said. “Did you, uh...did you overdo it a little?”

You told me to come here, Loki wanted to say, but he found himself nodding. “It’s too much,” he said hoarsely. The Grandmaster clicked his tongue.

“Oh, *sweetheart*,” he said. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“I didn’t think that you’d...” *Care*. Loki cut off. He felt lightheaded and vaguely nauseated, the beat of the music pounding in his stomach like a second heartbeat.

“Didn’t think I’d...oh, Loki! Honey, darling - I don’t want you to be unhappy! If I’d realized - oh, you *poor* thing.” The Grandmaster pulled him in, hand rubbing up and down his arm, and it felt *shamefully* good. His eyes prickled and shame made his chest hot.

“I want to leave,” Loki said, meaning half the party and half all of Sakaar.

“Let’s just - let’s take a minute, huh? Settle down a little, before you...here, why don’t you lie down, put your head in my lap, we’ll just...get comfortable, hmm?”

Loki knew he should argue, but he was half drunk and exhausted and his heart was still racing. He let the Grandmaster guide him down so his head was resting in his lap, and he was stroking Loki’s hair with a terrible tenderness.

“See?” The Grandmaster said. “I told you I’d take care of you, didn’t I?”

“You did,” Loki said miserably. If only that care weren’t so thoroughly poisoned, because Norns, he wanted it. With his eyes closed and the Grandmaster’s fingers combing through his hair, he could feel himself relaxing, his heartbeat slowing, and he didn’t know if it was magic or if he was just that pathetic. He didn’t really want to know.

Later, he told himself. Later he’d go back to trying to find a way out of this. Right now, he wasn’t going anywhere.

He wasn’t going anywhere.

The Grandmaster didn’t need cage walls to keep Loki boxed in. He barely needed the leash. He was just almost always there, dragging Loki to party after party and Loki might be getting better at keeping it together or that might be the fact that he’d reacquired the ability to skate just on the edge of too drunk enough to function.

He could feel the Grandmaster circling him like a shark, too, waiting for his rebellious body to start responding, and Loki dreaded the day he became impatient.

He waited a surprisingly long time before inviting (“inviting”) Loki to his first match since his return. So apparently the arena was still functional despite the revolt. Loki could not be terribly surprised: there were always more lost things falling to Sakaar, and always more thirst for blood.

Loki meant to sit as far from the Grandmaster as possible, but he felt the tightening pull of magic and ended up pressed next to him far too closely on the crowded couch. His skin crawled, the closeness of strangers making him twitchy, *nervous*.

The Grandmaster slung his arm around Loki's shoulders. "We've got a, uh, a great slate today," he said. "You're going to love it. I mean - nothing like my *champion*, of course, the one you...you ran off with--"

Loki wondered briefly where Banner was now. After Heimdall had spent his last power to send him away - where had he gone? Midgard? He shoved the thought away.

"I'm still - I'm still a bit *miffed* about that, Lo-lo, but, bygones be bygones, anyway. So nothing like *him*, but some other...good stuff. Should we get this show on the road?"

His projection shimmered into view above the arena, voice booming. Loki sank back into the couch, and the Grandmaster squeezed his shoulder.

"Come on," he said. "Perk up a little, won't you, sweetheart? We're here to have *fun*."

Loki looked down at the arena. There was a Kronan battling an alien of unknown species, and Loki thought of Korg. Was he still alive? Were any of the Asgardians they'd managed to evacuate still alive?

Stop thinking.

The Kronan's opponent chopped off its arm at the shoulder. Unbalanced, it fell, and the contender began beating it into rubble. Loki's stomach clenched and turned and he wanted to laugh at himself. *You've never been squeamish before. All the death you've seen--*

(All the death you've caused.)

He swallowed hard and took an unattended drink, watching as the bits of stone were cleared away. "Well," the Grandmaster said. "That was short. Hmph. Let's hope the next one's a little, hm...a little juicier."

Juicier. Blood and brains splattered on the ship wall, the body of a young woman with her head nearly cleaved from her shoulders--

Loki's stomach heaved and he took a deep breath, focusing on not shattering his glass. The Grandmaster felt - hot, and the sun was high in the sky, making him feel uncomfortably warm, almost feverish.

The next fight was between two Kree - former military, Loki judged distantly, based on their fighting style. He tried to distance himself, to avoid watching too closely as they battered at each other. The crowd's roar battered against his ears. Black blood spilled on the ground.

He slipped in something wet (something, you know what it is, how many dead) and Corvus's blade was immediately at his throat. He braced for the hot pain, the spill of blood, but it didn't come and he realized oh, no, this is going to be so much worse.

Loki jerked himself back, trying not to sway. Sweat had burst out on his forehead and he bit his tongue until he tasted his own blood (*oh no, mistake, copper taste exploding as blood vessels burst in your throat*). His chest was tightening, breathing starting to come in pants, and he gulped the rest of his drink in the hopes that it would burn away the nerves.

The match had ended. One of the Kree was dead, the other bleeding but alive. Next, and he tried not to hear the names, the titles, but one of them had a large golden helm and he thought of Heimdall, loyal traitor. *Should have sent him with Valkyrie. Should have sent Thor with her.* And he had only stood by and watched.

You may think this is suffering. No - it is salvation. Salvation written in blood and bodies on the floor and children, *children*, a man, no, a *boy* trying to fight off Proxima Midnight with his bare hands.

His ears rang and his stomach lurched. Loki leaned forward and vomited on the floor.

He suddenly had a great deal more space.

“Oh, *Loki*,” the Grandmaster sighed, sounding faintly exasperated. His heart thudded in his throat and he still felt too hot, feverish and chilled at the same time. The Grandmaster pulled him to his feet. “Someone - someone clean that up, would you? Oh, *ugh*. What’s - what’s the matter, Lo, did you, uh, eat something off?”

Loki opened his mouth, then closed it. He shook his head. The Grandmaster pursed his lips and sighed again.

“You’ve gotten yourself all worked up again, haven’t you,” he said reproachfully. “Well, that...that won’t do. Let’s just...” He snapped his fingers, and one of the servers came over. “Let’s have a Special #4, shall we? That’ll...that should help, fix you right up.”

“I don’t want,” he started to say, but the Grandmaster put a finger to his lips, then grimaced and pulled it away.

“Better not...better get you some mouthwash, hmm? But let’s just - stop right there. You’re going to feel *much* better, I promise. And I’m going to feel better too, see, because this is really...cramping my style, interrupting the games like this. You...you understand that, don’t you?”

Loki bit his cheek but he stopped before breaking skin. “I...yes.”

“Glad to hear it! Oh - here we go,” the Grandmaster said, pressing a glass into Loki’s hand. He looked down at it, and the Grandmaster pressed his fingers to the bottom, pushing it up toward Loki’s face. “Drink up, sweet thing.”

He drank it. It took effect almost immediately, relaxing him, fuzzing his thoughts and sending everything shifting sideways to where nothing particularly mattered. Sweeping away almost everything and leaving behind a sort of drowsy, pleasant, feeling.

“*There* we go,” the Grandmaster said, patting him on the shoulder before he turned away. “Now let’s...let’s get back to the games.”

Loki felt himself smile. “Yes,” he said dreamily. “All right.”

“Good boy,” the Grandmaster said. “Right as rain.”

He wasn’t. Loki knew he wasn’t. But right now, at least, he didn’t have to care about that, or anything else.

Exhausted from a restless and largely sleepless night - alone in his bed, for once - Loki woke up abruptly to cramps and nausea, and a feeling like a noose (*a fist*) closing around his throat.

For a terrifying, dizzying moment he thought his second (or was it third?) lease on life was expiring, but then he realized what he was feeling.

A tug on the leash.

He could try to resist it. Try to stay where he was and see what happened, try to endure it--

He doubled over with a moan and gave in. *Weakling.*

He had to guess which way to go based on where it didn't *hurt*. And every time he started to get more comfortable the worst would come back, and he could recognize perfectly well that he was being reeled in like a fish. Steered to wherever the Grandmaster wanted him to go.

Which turned out to be one of the baths.

"Oh, there you are!" The Grandmaster said, sitting in one of the steaming pools sunk in the floor. "Just, ah, just who I was hoping to see."

Loki was sure his smile looked strained. "Am I, now?"

"Absolutely," the Grandmaster said. "I was, a minute ago I *swear* I was thinking *now, wouldn't Loki like this* and here you are. How about that?"

"Incredible," Loki murmured.

"Well? Why don't you climb in and get comfortable," the Grandmaster said. "I was thinking - how about a spa day? Nice soak and then a massage, really polish you up and make you shiny and new - it'll feel good, don't you think?"

He'd been dragged here by fishhook and line. Loki didn't make the mistake of thinking he could say no. "Mm," he said instead. The Grandmaster frowned.

"My *goodness*," he said. "A little more *enthusiasm*. Are you, um, feeling quite well?"

"A little tense," Loki said.

"Well, then," the Grandmaster said. "A spa day is *just* what you need. Clothes off, now, we'll have Carissa bring you a robe and some slippers...and you come in here with me and soak a while. Sweat out all those, uh, *bad vibes*."

Loki managed not to sigh audibly by an act of will, and began removing his clothes. One of the servants - slaves - was there almost at once to whisk them away. Loki wondered if he'd be getting them back anytime soon.

He climbed into the bath at a distance from the Grandmaster, but he immediately scooted around to sit next to him, hip to hip. "Isn't this nice," he said warmly.

Loki closed his eyes and tried to pretend he was alone. Maybe in Asgard's bathhouses, swatting water into Thor's face, and then Thor would shove him underwater--

Asgard was ash, and Thor was probably dead, and thinking about his lungs burning for air when Thor held him under too long made him feel dizzy.

"Very nice," he made himself say. The Grandmaster laid a hand on his thigh.

"Good," he said. "That's just - that's just what I want for you, kitten, for you to be...*happy*. You know? And I know it's been hard but you're a regular *trooper*."

Loki wasn't sure if he was pleased or insulted. "You've been very generous," he murmured.

"Of course I have! I'm a very generous person," the Grandmaster said with enthusiasm. "And

you're just so *special*. You deserve, uh, the *royal* treatment."

A part of Loki turned toward that with yearning. The part of him that would crawl on its belly if it meant getting a pat on the head. "You're too kind," he said. The Grandmaster's hand crept a little higher, his palm pressing down.

"And I get that...I get that there's some, uh, physical issues, here. That you're still not...*up* for everything." He winked, and seemed disappointed when Loki just blinked at him. "That was a joke, Lo-lo. Because- oh, never mind."

"I am - *very* sorry," Loki lied, wondering if he dared inch away. "I know this must all be very inconvenient for you, but I appreciate your patience."

"I have been very patient," the Grandmaster said, and smiled. "So maybe...maybe you could, um, give me something for being *so* patient?"

Loki swallowed and felt himself still. "Give you something, meaning..."

The Grandmaster leaned toward him, fingers tapping against his leg under the water. "Oh, *Loki*. You don't need to sound so nervous! It's nothing, um...nothing you haven't done *before*. I was just thinking..." His hand slid from Loki's thigh to his wrist, raising his hand and pressing his lips to Loki's knuckles one after the other.

Loki relaxed. He'd expected more. Or...worse. But using his hand was easy, and a little shiver that almost felt good actually ran down his spine for the way the Grandmaster looked at him. Like Loki was a sweet he wanted to devour.

"I can do that," Loki said.

"Do what?" The Grandmaster asked, all innocence, and then laughed. "Just kidding. C'mere, sweetheart."

Loki turned, starting to reach out, but the Grandmaster caught his wrist. "Ah," he said. "Not like that. I want to, to enjoy the view. Right? There's room, you can, ah, straddle my - yes, just like that."

The stone of the ledge was hard under Loki's knees, and the Grandmaster's thighs spread, pushing Loki's legs further apart. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that it was just his body. Barely even his, really, he'd left it and then been slammed back inside it by this man's intervention.

Perhaps that wasn't as reassuring a train of thought as he'd meant it to be.

He eased his hand down to cup the Grandmaster's cock and press lightly with the heel of his palm. The Grandmaster hummed approvingly, stiffening under Loki's hand.

He could do this. Easy. He'd done it before, hadn't he? Of course, then he hadn't had a magical noose around his neck and the recent memory of having his neck snapped--

(Stop thinking, you idiot.)

He focused on the Grandmaster, whose hands were rubbing up and down Loki's thighs under the water. Loki took his still mostly limp cock in his hand and rubbed his thumb over the head. "Nice," the Grandmaster said, "*very* nice, still got the, ah, the touch, haven't you, see, how could I let you slip away? We've just *started* and I'm already wishing I could, uh...oh, well, later." His eyes gleamed and Loki focused on not letting his breath catch. The Grandmaster's hips pushed up

against his hand and he added, “you can go a little faster, you know.”

Loki knew when a suggestion wasn't a suggestion. He tightened his hand around the Grandmaster's cock.

The water didn't make it easy. No real lubrication, and he thought about saying something but the Grandmaster's smug and slightly edged smile stole his breath away. Something clenched in his stomach, vaguely like arousal.

No, Loki thought savagely. *Don't. Don't you dare.* The Grandmaster squeezed his thigh and tilted his head back, looking up with a smile.

“Why don't you - why don't you kiss me, sweetheart? Show me how much you, uh, appreciate everything I'm doing for you.”

Loki meant to keep it brief, but one of the Grandmaster's hands flashed up and grabbed his hair, holding him fast as he thrust his tongue into Loki's mouth.

“I like this,” he said when he pulled back, leaving Loki panting. “You on my lap, it looks almost like...like you're riding my cock. Once you're all *better* - we'll do that, how about it? Just like this, so I can, hm, see your *gorgeous* face when you come.”

That stirring in his gut again, and Loki's breath caught, his hand squeezing unconsciously. The Grandmaster made a low, pleased noise and Loki hated that it pulled at him. Made him feel like he'd done something right, almost more than the hot weight of the Grandmaster's cock against his palm.

He quickened his pace, hoping to get this over with as quickly as possible, though he knew it wasn't going to stop here, that this was just a first step, that--

The Grandmaster spilled with a groan, seed clouding the water between them. He dug his fingers into Loki's thighs hard enough that he knew he would bruise, if only temporarily. Slumping back, he sighed contentedly and beamed up at Loki.

“Not your best work,” he said, “but that's all right, you're out of practice.”

Loki jerked, feeling like he'd been slapped. Sick shame exploded to life in his gut and he wanted to pull away, get out of this water and leave. The Grandmaster laughed. “Oh, sugarplum,” he said. “Don't look so *upset*. I'm not - I'm not *mad*. But I *know* you can do better, that's all. I want to make sure you, ah, reach your full *potential*.”

The hysterical urge to laugh joined the shame. He moved to withdraw, but the Grandmaster caught him, hands cupping his ass and holding him in place. “No, no,” he said. “I like you right where you are. You just...settle in, hm? Soak away that stress. Next we're getting massages.”

There weren't a lot of choices. His legs were still splayed open, the position less than comfortable. One of the Grandmaster's hands ran up his spine and then back down.

“Gorgeous,” he murmured. “Just beautiful,” and Loki hated how it felt to hear that. Like he *wanted* it. But that wasn't exactly surprising, was it? The Grandmaster's approval was like a drug, and not one that Loki was capable of rejecting.

They got out of the baths just as Loki was beginning to feel faint, and transitioned to the promised massage.

Loki hadn't realized how many knots were in his muscles until the masseuse - four-armed, how useful - started working. He was aware that he was making helpless, nearly obscene noises, but he couldn't hold them in.

"Goodness, Loki," the Grandmaster said, lying on his stomach next to Loki and laughing, "you're going to make me blush."

Loki answered with a groan as something *crunched* in his shoulder, pain zipping up to his skull and then fading. The masseuse murmured something and the Grandmaster laughed again.

"Luorn says - oh, never mind, it won't translate. It's good, right? Feels good?"

"Yes," Loki allowed. "It...does."

"See? I know what you need. Mm, a little lower, dear, there you go."

Loki squeezed his eyes closed and whined as Luorn's fingers - eight on each hand - found a snarl near the base of his spine. Something clicked and he felt momentarily woozy.

"Luorn's a master," the Grandmaster said. "Really just finds...*all* those good spots. Right, Loki?"

"Uh-huh," Loki managed to say, going increasingly limp. His entire body was starting to feel warm and liquid, various aches he'd hardly been aware of dissipating, blood tingling under his skin. Luorn moved from his back to his hips, not quite massaging Loki's ass, and he moaned again, the warmth settling in his stomach.

"So *vocal*," the Grandmaster said proudly, and Loki flushed but couldn't object. Or wasn't going to, because he was aware now that he was half hard and was hoping no one would notice. *Stop it*, he thought to his body. *Stop it, not now*, but of course it didn't listen, and Luorn's hands all over his skin, encouraging blood-flow and releasing tension, weren't helping. He closed his eyes and focused on breathing slow and evenly.

"Oh, *Loki*!" The Grandmaster said, sounding delighted, and Loki winced. He didn't know *how* the Grandmaster knew, but he could tell just by the tone of his voice that he'd realized what Loki was trying to hide. "We-ell, *there* we go. I was starting to *worry*." Loki's face flushed hot. "I guess you just needed...a good rubdown, hmm? Work out all those, uh, kinks that nasty business left behind."

"Maybe so," Loki mumbled.

"Luorn, let's - ah, let's pause a second, I want to..." He heard the Grandmaster move, the slap of his feet on the ground and then his fingers tapping Loki's hips. "Roll over, sweetheart, I want to see."

Loki swallowed hard, his face *burning* now, but he rolled to his side. His cock was barely hard anymore but the Grandmaster still beamed at him like Loki was a prized pet who had just performed a trick on command.

He turned his face away and closed his eyes.

"This is good news!" The Grandmaster said. "Let's, um - I think this calls for a celebratory drink, don't you? You, uh - yes, you over there, hop to it."

Loki started to push himself up, but the Grandmaster's hand caught his shoulder and pressed him back down. "Ah, ah," he said. "Let's not leave a job half finished. Luorn's still got more work to do on you."

“Of course,” Loki said, in truth almost relieved. It meant the Grandmaster wasn’t going to pounce immediately. Though it probably wouldn’t take him long.

“Don’t worry,” the Grandmaster said, tucking an errant strand of Loki’s hair back behind his ear. “I’ll still go easy on you, Lo-lo. I don’t want you to get *too* overwhelmed.”

Just overwhelmed enough, Loki thought unhappily. The Grandmaster’s fingers ran through his hair.

“After this,” he said, “let’s, um...let’s go back to your place and, ah, celebrate properly. Just you and me. How does that sound?”

He did not succeed particularly well at disguising the eagerness in his voice. Perhaps he wasn’t really trying.

“Perfect,” Loki said. He didn’t think he sounded even remotely sincere, but the Grandmaster apparently thought it was good enough, because he patted Loki on the shoulder.

“Back to it,” he said. “I want you all *nice* and relaxed. Luorn, you, uh...remind me to send you a gift basket, eh?”

Loki might have been tempted to try to hold onto some tension out of spite, or pointless defiance, but Luorn was really *very* good at what they did. The Grandmaster was going to have him *all nice and relaxed*, and there was nothing Loki could do about it.

So he might as well try to enjoy it for now, and not think about the future.

“Ahhhhhh,” Loki said. The Grandmaster lifted his head with a wet pop and looked up Loki’s body with a grin.

“You do make the *best* noises,” he said. “I forgot about that. Just...amazing. Stellar.”

Loki took a couple of panting breaths. He felt almost - excruciatingly sensitive, and the Grandmaster was taking his *sweet* time. Savoring, he said. Loki was fairly certain it was some sort of retaliation for Loki’s making him wait.

He still wanted it. Still responded to it. The Grandmaster was *damnably* good with his tongue.

Loki twisted his hands in the sheets and turned his head to the side as the Grandmaster dragged the flat of said tongue slowly up the underside of his cock, his eyes squeezed closed. “See,” he said, pausing again, “This - you’ve been missing this, haven’t you?”

No, Loki’s mind howled. *Yes*, his body screamed, because for almost the first time since waking up he actually felt *alive*. He hated it. He wanted it. And this was what the Grandmaster was so *good* at, because he twisted those two things together so Loki couldn’t tell them apart.

He engulfed Loki with his mouth again, lips and tongue working him back up until every breath came with little pathetic cries, unraveling like cheap cloth until he came almost painfully.

The Grandmaster pushed himself up off Loki’s thighs, wiping a stray dribble of semen off his chin with his thumb and sucking it clean. “Well,” he said, sounding unbearably pleased with himself. “*That’s* better.”

Loki felt his face heat and swallowed hard, shame starting to intrude on the buzz that came after

orgasm. He tried to shove it away with little success, suddenly feeling like he'd given away something new (instead of something he'd already surrendered once before).

"How are you feeling?" The Grandmaster asked, climbing up to stretch out next to him, one hand resting on Loki's stomach. His skin quivered slightly under that touch.

"Good," he said, because that was the expected answer.

"That's not very descriptive," the Grandmaster said reproachfully.

"It's...a bit hard to think," Loki said, which wasn't dishonest. The Grandmaster tapped his fingers against Loki's abdomen, but seemed to accept that answer.

"Of course this is just a test drive, really," he said. "Getting you warmed up. I've got...my birthday's in a couple weeks, you know, I'm planning a *great* party and I'd just love if you could, ah, participate fully."

Loki had a feeling that, regardless of his condition, he would be participating fully. He didn't let himself whimper, just lay back feeling stunned and stupid.

He looked down at his body, the ugly scar in the center of his chest, exhaustion crawling back over him. The Grandmaster tweaked one of his nipples, which brought him jerking back.

"What are you looking so sad for?" He asked. "This is *good*. You're getting - all better now. This...this moping, Lo-lo, it's getting a little - *old*."

Loki knew a warning when he heard one. He took a shaky breath. "I know," he said. "It is."

"So you're going to...let it go, right?"

Let what go, Loki wanted to scream. The fact that I died? That I can't sleep without dreaming of fingers closing around my throat? The fact that you have a leash on me that you can yank at will? The fact that my brother is fighting and dying alone - or already dead - while I am here, alone, and no one will come for me because as far as the universe is concerned I am dead, as half the universe will be dead soon, if they aren't already--

"Hey, now," the Grandmaster said. "Sweetheart, you're, uh - you're shaking."

"It isn't that simple," Loki said. "I can't just *forget*."

"Can't," the Grandmaster interrupted. "*Can't*. That's not...sure you can, darling. Let me show you."

Before Loki could pull away, or say a word, the Grandmaster cupped the side of his face and--

He *felt* the memories bleeding away. Pain, *can't breathe, help me, Thor I'm sorry I'm sorry*, Heimdall murdered, the Tesseract glowing in his palm, Thor screaming in agony, a cascade of horrors fading, wiped away. The slaughter of Asgard, a ship looming in front of them as Thor promised everything would be fine. They were still there, but faded, foggy, inaccessible.

"See?" The Grandmaster said. "Just like...like that."

Then he pulled his hand away and the memories came rushing back in. The air left Loki's lungs like he'd been punched in the stomach, and he gasped for it, trying to get it back, and he could feel Thanos's hand around his throat all over again, his vision tunneling as he fought for air, but he

couldn't breathe couldn't couldn't --

"Shh," the Grandmaster was saying. "There, there. Wow, that's...that was intense, wasn't it? I wasn't expecting...well. Oh dear."

He couldn't feel his body. His vision was swimming and his head spun. He swallowed convulsively, or tried, but it wasn't working, fingers squeezing tighter and tighter--

"Okay," he heard. "Let's just--"

Loki's lungs inflated. Deflated. His heartbeat slowed very suddenly, stopped hammering in his ears; his thoughts went foggy and dull. It wasn't a decision he made but a decision made *for* him, like someone manipulating his limbs only somehow reaching inside him and forming his body to someone else's will. It felt *wrong*, everything that was *him* shunted to the side, a passenger in his own flesh.

And then it was over and he was lying limp and quivering, the Grandmaster frowning at him. Loki licked his lips. "What did you do?" He asked, voice hoarse.

"Fixed that little - uh, problem," the Grandmaster said. "It shouldn't be an issue anymore. Goodness. You were always high strung, sweet pea, but this is really another level." He sighed. "You're lucky you're worth it."

Shouldn't be an issue? Loki thought blankly. He wondered what that meant. "You were...you made me..."

The Grandmaster waved a hand. "Feels a little funny, I expect? It's nothing, really. Just a bit of tweaking. Same principle as when I fixed your little, uh, death problem, really, a bit of cellular...don't you worry your pretty head. No more of these little fits, that's the upshot."

That seemed like it should please him more than it did. "Oh," Loki said faintly.

"What," the Grandmaster said. "No 'thank you'?"

"Thank you, Grandmaster," Loki said.

"You're welcome," he said. "Now. I think we could both use a little...a little distraction, don't you?" His hand drifted down to Loki's hip.

You're never going to get away, Loki thought miserably. Your body isn't even a little your own. You belong to him. Every piece.

He rolled toward the Grandmaster and kissed him like he could forget.

He couldn't forget. Or rather, the Grandmaster was very good at reminding him. Sometimes the leash was longer, and Loki could wander where he pleased; other times it was too short for Loki to walk more than five paces away. Or he used it to draw Loki where he wanted him - to the arena, to a party, to his newly refurbished pleasure ship.

It turned out, Loki thought, standing on the latter and staring out at the stars, that he'd been telling the truth about whatever he'd done to Loki's mind. Every time he started feeling the first flutters of panic it was shoved down like his head was being pushed underwater. It might have been a relief if it didn't feel like someone else taking control of him, and there was nothing he could do to fight back.

“Hello there, sweetheart! Having a good time?”

Loki turned, plastering a smile on his face. “Grandmaster,” he murmured.

“What are you doing off here on your own?” He asked. “Don’t you want to, ah, do a little mingling?”

Loki gestured out the window. “I was admiring the view.”

“It is a lovely view,” he said, putting an arm around Loki’s shoulders. “Like, hmm, other things around here.” His eyes swept up and down Loki’s body, absurdly unsubtle.

“You’re too kind,” Loki said. The drink had already gone a little to his head, fuzzing the edges of his thoughts and leaving everything a little...softer. He still caught himself thinking of Thor: *where are you, what are you doing, I should be with you, I should be helping.*

“I am, aren’t I?” He pulled his arm from Loki’s shoulders to slide both arms around his waist instead, resting his chin on Loki’s shoulder. “You know what...hm. You know what I’m thinking about right now? Looking at you standing here all...*well*. Standing here.”

Loki licked his lips. “What are you thinking about?”

“I’m, ah, thinking about you, and me, and that, mm, sweet mouth of yours, and maybe a little, uh...getting a friend involved. Work both ends, as it were, I remember how...*needy* you can be.”

Loki’s breathing snagged and he froze. “Oh, yes,” the Grandmaster purred, moving his hands to Loki’s shoulders and digging his thumbs in next to his shoulder blades. “That sounds nice. Normally I’d...be all about first dibs, but I feel like I’ve been so *selfish* keeping you all to myself.”

“It’s your right to be selfish,” Loki said weakly, “isn’t it?”

“Well, yes,” the Grandmaster said. “But you’re too delectable not to share.” He rubbed his thumbs in little circles. “Come on, Lo-lo. It’ll be *fun*.”

He downed the rest of his drink and turned, forcing a smile. “Where do you want me?”

“That’s the spirit,” the Grandmaster said, smile blooming.

Less than fifteen minutes later he was on his knees, the Grandmaster’s fingers in his hair as he pumped in and out of Loki’s mouth, someone else’s excessively long fingers in his ass - or maybe it wasn’t fingers, he wasn’t entirely sure. Regardless, it was more than he wanted, which meant it was just what he wanted, and he hated himself for that and a thousand other things which were exactly why this was what he *deserved*.

The Grandmaster was murmuring praise, cock pushing inexorably into Loki’s throat as he cooed: good, so *good*, Loki, look at you, look how well you take it, see, folks, isn’t this the stuff--

You were resurrected for this.

He wanted to laugh. He wanted to howl. He did arch and moan and squirm, seeking friction, getting nothing; body sparking like he was going to burst into flames.

He was never, *ever* going to get away. He’d been stupid to believe anything else.

Another night, another party. An *intimate dinner*, the Grandmaster called it, *for my birthday*, and

Loki suspected that slant to *intimate* was entirely intentional. He found himself looking around the room and wondering how many of these people he was going to end up fucking before the night was over.

The haze of being half drunk couldn't quite dull the bitterness in that thought.

He was only barely paying attention to the conversation he was nominally engaged in, focusing rather on scrutinizing a brooch pinned to a Kronan's chest and wondering if it was alive. His attention was drawn back by the Grandmaster's arm sliding around his waist.

"See," he said. "Loki, here - he was *such* a troublemaker. But we've sorted that out, haven't we? And I'm - we're all *so* glad, he's such a *treasure* to have around."

Loki smiled thinly. "You flatter me."

The Grandmaster smiled at him. "Only true, sweetheart." Loki's chest warmed with pleasure, and then with self-disgust. A laugh boiled up in his throat and he swallowed it back; the Grandmaster's hand slid down and pinched his ass. "Look at that face! So...I love it."

His head was spinning, and he felt vaguely as though he was teetering on the edge of something. Loki forced a smile, and the Grandmaster beamed.

"As I was saying," he said to the others - Loki didn't recognize them, didn't know their names, imagined he'd see them naked in less than an hour. "It's been a busy year, you know? Just...crazy. But things are looking up now."

"Of course it is," one of the guests said, voice high and musical. "With you in charge, Grandmaster..."

"Dallia! Now who's the flatterer. Of course, you're *right*, I am - I mean, we've got something really good going on here, don't we?"

"Absolutely wonderful."

Loki let the words wash over him, his thoughts straying, as they always did, to Thor, to Thanos. Dread, *terror*, rose up and was shoved down, the Grandmaster's ownership over his body asserting itself once again.

He drained the rest of his half-empty glass and set it on a passing server's tray. His ears were ringing and he could feel himself staring down into an abyss, black and bottomless.

The Grandmaster patted his ass, drawing him back again. "Be a dear, sweetheart," the he said, not looking at him. "Get us some drinks, would you?"

Something in Loki's head snapped. "No," he said. Not quietly.

There was sudden perfect, perfect, silence.

The Grandmaster turned toward him. "What was that?" He said, voice pleasant.

"I said, no," Loki repeated flatly. He didn't smile. "I don't want to." He could feel people staring at him. Nervous, incredulous, eagerly awaiting his destruction. He ignored all of them, keeping his eyes on the Grandmaster.

"Oh," he said. "Oh dear. Lo, you *know* I don't like-"

"I know," Loki interrupted. "You don't *like* that word. You don't want anyone to refuse you. But I am. Refusing. You can drug me or use your magic on me or yank the chain you have around my neck, but I am finished pretending."

The Grandmaster's eyes narrowed, but a moment later his expression relaxed and he laughed. "What has gotten *into* you, sweet thing?"

"My name," Loki said, "is Loki. You know it. You can use it."

This time he caught a flash of genuine irritation. "You're being very *difficult*, kitten."

"I've barely even started."

The Grandmaster glanced around at the people staring, and abruptly waved a hand. "Party's over, folks," he said. "Since *someone* seems to be acting like a complete spoilsport."

As they left, several attendees cast Loki dirty looks. He ignored them, snagging a drink from the bar and sipping it. Turning his back pointedly on the Grandmaster.

"So," the Grandmaster said, his voice back to coaxing. "What is it you want, Lo-lo? What's all this fuss about? You're not still wanting to *leave* us, are you?" He could feel the Grandmaster's power probing, sliding against his senses.

"It doesn't matter to you what I want," Loki said. "Only what you do."

"Now, Loki," the Grandmaster said. "You're really being quite unreasonable."

"I'm just being honest." Loki bared his teeth. "I don't imagine that happens to you very often."

The flash of irritation this time was stronger, and slower to fade. "This is - after all I've done for you, Loki, you're going to treat me like this?"

"All you've done to me is for your benefit," Loki said. "I'm your prisoner. Your *slave*."

"Hey," the Grandmaster said. "We don't use that word."

"Oh, dear," Loki said. "I just did. What are you going to do?"

The Grandmaster took a step toward Loki, his omnipresent smile gone. "Now, Loki," he said, "I like you, I - really, I do, but you're really...pushing me, here. I'm getting a little upset. I don't want to be upset."

Loki smiled thinly. "Isn't that a pity. I don't want to be here."

The Grandmaster's nostrils flared. "Sweetheart. Are you forgetting *why* you're here? You were, uh - you were *dead*."

"I remember," Loki said. His heartbeat was starting to thud in his stomach but he held his ground.

"If I hadn't been so - so *generous*, you'd *still* be dead."

"Generous," Loki said. "That's one word for it."

"It's *the* word for it." He could hear the danger growing in the Grandmaster's voice. Feel it, in the usually subtle aura of power suddenly very much there, swirling around him. "Not something I'd do for just anyone. At all."

“If you’re expecting me to thank you for making me your slave,” Loki said, deliberately emphasizing the word, “you’re going to be waiting for a long time.”

The Grandmaster’s eyes flashed, though his expression was still struggling to stay pleasant, careless. “You know, I think - I think maybe you *are* forgetting, after I put in all that work bringing you back, you don’t even *know* - do you know what a *mess* you were before I found you? You were just - just like-” He wrinkled his nose and made a little gesture.

Loki could suddenly feel the pressure on his throat. Constricting bloodflow, blocking his airways. Tighter and tighter and he was dying all over again, second by second, the Grandmaster walking him back through the injuries he’d healed - or else just withdrawing his power and letting Loki’s body fall back into the state it was meant to be in.

Loki heard his inhale whistle. His hands fluttered at his throat as he fought for air, his head beginning to spin. The bones in his neck creaked, on the verge of giving way. He was going to die, again, and this time it might even stick.

Abruptly, it ended, and he could breathe again.

“Is that what you want?” The Grandmaster demanded, almost petulant. “To go back to *that*? Because that would be easy enough.”

“So do it,” Loki said, his heart racing. “Kill me.”

“I could,” the Grandmaster said, and there was a slightly ugly edge to his voice now. “I could kill you where you stand and bring you back over and over again, as many times as I wanted. I could bring you back without any of that pesky *spunk* of yours, you’d do *whatever* I wanted-”

“*So do it*,” Loki hissed, taking a step forward. “You *can*. So. Do. It.”

The Grandmaster’s jaw tightened. He grabbed Loki’s face and yanked him forward, fingers squeezing bone hard enough that it ached. He mashed his lips against Loki’s, tongue thrusting into his mouth, and with the motion shoving his magic inside, forcing that immense, burning power down Loki’s throat. He stiffened and tried to jerk away but the Grandmaster held him fast as he burned, *inside*, the Grandmaster’s magic searing through him, filling him until he thought he would explode.

“You think you understand what I can do?” He hissed, low and cold as the space between stars as Loki vibrated, straining to contain what had been forced into him. “I could unmake you down to *atoms* and remake you the same way. I could unravel your mind like a spool of thread and rearrange your thoughts so you’d think you’d *always* been here and you’d never want anything else. I could strip away more than that so you’d rejoice if I used you for a *footstool*.”

Loki’s breathing came hard and fast.

“Do it, then,” he said. His voice hoarse, and if he was afraid - he *was* afraid - it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered. He *didn’t care* and there was a terrible kind of freedom in that.

The Grandmaster let go and backhanded him. Loki screamed as the magic inside him surged. Tears leaked down his cheeks and they burned on his skin. He sucked in a breath and held it, waiting.

The Grandmaster pulled his magic out of Loki all at once and he crumpled to his knees, gasping as much from the sudden loss as from relief. “Oh, Loki,” the Grandmaster said, voice more normal. “Loki, Loki, Loki.”

“Either let me go,” Loki said hoarsely, “or get rid of me. Because I will fight you every step of the way, otherwise. I won’t win. Obviously. But I don’t think you’ll enjoy it either.”

The Grandmaster stared at him, expression cold, and then it abruptly softened. “Sweetheart,” he said. “Honey - you don’t think I’d really - that I’d get rid of *you*. Certainly not just because you’re, uh, pitching a little fit. I’m not...why, I’ve already forgiven you.”

Loki blinked. “What?”

“Shh,” the Grandmaster said, crouching down and reaching out. This time when he cupped Loki’s jaw it was gentle, and his thumb brushed across Loki’s lips, leaving a tingle behind. He would have snapped at him like a dog, but his head spun and he had to catch himself so he didn’t topple over. “I can see you’re just a bit worked up. So high-strung. I’m so *sorry* for losing my temper with you.”

Loki shook his head, trying to clear it. “I - *what?*”

“You’re feeling calmer now, aren’t you? Now that you - now that you got that all out of your system?”

He was. Calmer, and light-headed, and confused. And he knew why. *Knew* the Grandmaster was doing this. “I don’t-”

“Isn’t that better?” The Grandmaster said. “A nice...nice bit of R&R, I think. Settle your nerves. How about it?”

Loki wanted to cry. He slumped forward, and the Grandmaster caught him. “There you go,” he said soothingly. “Just...*relax*, sweetheart. You’re...good, good now, huh?”

“I want to go home,” Loki said. He sounded pitiful, plaintive.

“You *are* home,” the Grandmaster said gently. “Sakaar’s the only home you’ll ever need.”

When half of Sakaar dissolved into ash, Loki regretted that he was among the wrong half.

He looked down at the pile that had been his conversational partner, and tossed back the rest of his drink before looking for another.

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